

## Into the Light

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### I

“Hey, Mom, you’ve got a birthday coming up soon. What can I get you?” My son’s question took me by surprise. A birthday again? I just had one, didn’t I? Boy, that year sure went by fast!

“A birthday, huh? Let’s see. How about a CD or a book or a game? Something like that?”

I am really not all that hard to buy for. I love to read, anything and everything; I enjoy all different kinds of music, including the stuff kids listen to today, and I have never really outgrown the love of playing games.

All in all, I ended up with some really nice presents this year: a new CD by a “hot” youth band called “Westlife”, a cool new Bey Blade (fancy top), a cute Beanie Baby (stuffed animal) and a couple of great books. With the exception of the books, it is perhaps rather hard to imagine these as presents for someone who has weathered half a century, and I have to ask, “if this is supposed to be midlife, where is the crisis?” I do not feel any particular anxieties about my future, my health, my job or my marriage. I simply do not feel my age. I still consider myself very young at heart, and that is probably one of the reasons I enjoy fairy tales so much.

Both of the books I received as presents pertain to this great love of mine. One was a book on fairies and the other, entitled “Once Upon a Midlife: Classic Stories and Mythic Tales to Illuminate the Middle Years” by Allan B. Chinen, was something quite new for me. The tales I have read and written about in the past have been the classic hero stories designed for the younger set, so this particular book was a welcome discovery.

In this paper I wish to write about these new tales, what they may mean and their importance for middle-aged adults. We will be taking a close look at one of the tales, entitled “Destiny.” It amazes me that I happened to choose this particular tale from the book to read first. It is an adaptation of a story from Croatia, a historic region along the Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia. When I was in England this summer I came across an out-of-print book on Yugoslav folk tales which looked interesting, so I bought it. It was not until after returning to Japan and looking once more at the tale in Chinen’s book that I recognized where it had come from. Excitedly, I opened the Yugoslav tales and, sure enough, there

was the same story with a different title, “Fate.” And so it was “fate”, I believe, that I chose this story to write about.

In the next section we will take a brief look at the nature and importance of fairy tales in general and then continue with a discussion of this new type of story called “middle tales.”

## II

Although most adults find fairy tales charming, they usually regard them as stories strictly for children. It is only within the last few centuries, however, that fairy tales have been aimed at children. The original stories were oral and designed as entertainment for adult ears only. When literacy became more common and technology more complex, the tales were simplified and printed for children’s enjoyment. The stories were deemed suitable for peasants and children, but not sophisticated enough for educated grown-ups.

Maria Tatar, a noted scholar on fairy tales, states that “advanced middle age appears to be a popular time for admitting interest in fairy tales.”<sup>1</sup> George Bernard Shaw, at age fifty-five, declared that the Grimm’s brothers were the most entertaining German authors that he had ever read. C.S. Lewis confessed that he had been reading fairy tales in secret for a number of years but that it was only after turning fifty that he felt free to acknowledge his addiction to them. Their simplicity and emotional appeal have the power to stir long-dormant childhood feelings and to quicken our sympathies for the downtrodden. They offer wit and wisdom, and we can find something in fairy tales for every age and every generation. They utilize symbolism in the choice of places and events. For example, a forest or ocean may represent journeys into the subconscious. The appearance of a specific character, such as a queen or a woman in rags, most likely serves to signify a particular attitude or trait embodied by that figure.

Fairy tales symbolize, in the language of fantasy, the developmental tasks individuals must encounter as they go through life. Young children and adolescents face the tasks involved in growing up as portrayed in stories such as “Hansel and Gretel” or “Jack and the Beanstalk,” in which the child-hero leaves home to achieve independence. The process is rarely easy in real life, and this difficulty is reflected in the fairy tales’ hair-raising ordeals, such as fighting witches or outwitting giants.

After the stages of childhood and adolescence, assuming that the developmental challenges are met - and there are no guarantees that they will be - a new type of tale emerges. These stories, which alert us to the nature of the developmental tasks that adults face, remind us that maturity has a different face than that of youth. They are what Chinen, a psychiatrist with a special interest in the developmental stages of adulthood and aging, refers

to as the “middle tales” and “elder tales.”

We are all familiar with the hero-oriented tales of our youth in which the prince conquers the foe and wins the hand of the princess; middle tales describe what happens after the heroic phase. While heroic tales reaffirm the cultural norms (for example what men and women “should” be) the middle tales are rather more countercultural, telling us what life is really like, irrespective of cultural expectations and roles. They emphasize truths that individuals and society might prefer to ignore. The stories are often disconcerting, but because they force men and women to reflect on themselves, they are ultimately healing.

Chinen states that these tales represent the different stages of adult life. The first stage involves settling down and adjusting to the necessity of work as well as the disappearance of the magic and innocence of youth. Another stage is the reversal of gender roles, whereby men come to terms with their feminine side, and women with their masculine side, followed by a renegotiation of their relationship. A third stage is coming to terms with the dark side of life: death, evil, tragedy, and the realization that there are many forces over which we have no control. The young hero always assumes that, with enough effort, or wit, or courage, he can do everything. By midlife, that assumption has vanished. People get sick. People die. Bad things happen to good people.

At midlife there is a major shift in thinking from “black and white” to “gray.” Young people, in their black and white way of thinking say, “I’m white and pure, and the other person is black and evil.” In midlife they realize that, like the other person, they are gray, with both black and white aspects. This shift in thinking fosters a much more tolerant attitude towards others. The young hero, in contrast, is not tolerant; he seeks to slay the evil.

Provided with this brief introduction to the middle tales, let us now look at one of the tales Chinen has collected, entitled “Destiny.”

### III

Once upon a time, two brothers lived together. The elder toiled all day, plowing the fields and tending the animals, and the farm prospered greatly. The younger spent his time eating, drinking, and making merry. At length, the older brother had enough. “It is not fair that I do all the work,” he told his younger brother. “We must divide our property, and go our separate ways.”

“You have charge of everything, and we enjoy good fortune,” the younger man pleaded. “Why make a change?” But the older brother insisted, and so the two divided their fields and flocks. The younger brother hired men to tend his herds and fields, and then spent his time as he always had, enjoying himself. The older brother, meanwhile, worked hard in

his fields, and tended his own animals. But one thing after another happened to the older brother. Wolves devoured his herds, fire destroyed his home, and wild beasts trampled his wheat. Soon he was so poor that he could barely feed himself, and he walked barefoot on the ground.

At last the poor man resolved to visit his younger brother and ask for some help. On his way, the older brother came upon a large herd of sheep, watched by a beautiful woman. The maiden sat on a stool and spun golden thread. The older brother went up to her, doffed his cap, and asked to whom the sheep belonged.

“Your brother,” the maiden said.

The man was astonished, and then asked, “And who are you?”

“I am your brother’s Luck,” she replied.

The poor man felt amazed. He asked, “And what of my Luck?”

“She is a hag who lives in that forest,” the maiden pointed to the hills.

The poor man thanked the woman and then went to his brother’s home. When the younger man saw his elder brother dressed in rags, the rich man wept with grief and brought out clothes, shoes, food, and money. The older brother stayed for a few days and then returned to his own home. There he picked up his walking staff, put a loaf of bread in a bag, and set off to look for his Luck.

The elder brother searched for some time in the forest. At last he came upon a hideous old woman, sleeping beneath a tree. The man struck her on the back to awaken her, and when she saw him, she eyed his new shoes and clothes and said, “Lucky for you I was asleep. Otherwise, I would have taken away the gifts from your brother, just like I took away everything else you had.”

“So you are my rotten Luck!” the poor man exclaimed. “Cursed woman! You are the cause of all my troubles! Who sent you to me?”

“It was Destiny,” the old woman said.

“Where can I find this wretch?” the man demanded angrily. “I have something to tell him!”

The old woman shrugged. “Go and look for Destiny yourself.” She settled back down and then fell asleep.

The man went searching for Destiny and traveled far and wide. At last he came upon a hermit who knew where Destiny lived. “His home is on top of that mountain,” the hermit said, pointing in the distance. “But when you see him, take care not to say anything until he speaks to you. Just do whatever he does.”

The poor man thanked the hermit and walked up to the castle of Destiny. It was a magnificent place, full of servants, gardens, and rich tapestries. When the poor man went in, he found Destiny eating a splendid supper. Remembering the advice of the hermit, the man said nothing, sat near Destiny, and began to eat also. A little later, Destiny went to bed, and the poor fellow followed him and slept on the floor.

In the middle of the night, a great commotion shook the castle, and a voice cried out, "Many souls have come into the world tonight, Destiny. They await your gifts."

Destiny arose, went to a beautiful chest, took out gold and jewels, and threw them to the right and left. "I give those new souls the bounty I enjoy today. As I am now, so shall they be!" The poor man watched everything in silence.

The next day, when the elder brother awoke, he found that the beautiful castle had disappeared. In its place was an ordinary home, and when Destiny sat down to dinner that evening, there were no golden plates like the night before. Still there was meat and bread in abundance. Destiny and the poor man ate in silence, and then went to sleep.

At midnight, a commotion shook the house, and a dreadful voice cried out again, "Many souls have come into the world tonight, Destiny. They await your gifts."

Destiny arose, went to a small wooden box, and took out piles of silver coins. "I give those new souls the bounty I enjoy today," Destiny cried out, strewing the coins right and left. Destiny closed the box, returned to bed, and fell asleep. The poor man watched everything, but said nothing.

In the morning, when the older brother opened his eyes, he found himself in a smaller house. His supper that night was plainer, too. And when the terrible voice called out at midnight, Destiny gave out copper coins to the souls born that day. This went on each day, until one morning, the older brother awoke to find himself in a tiny hovel. Destiny was outside, digging in the ground for food, and the poor man followed his example. That evening, they had only one small loaf of bread for supper. Destiny broke it in two, giving half to the poor man. At midnight, when the terrible voice cried out, Destiny opened a small wooden chest and scattered pebbles and pennies.

"I give those new souls the bounty I enjoy today," Destiny proclaimed. "As I am now, so shall they be!"

In the morning, the poor man awoke and found himself once again in a magnificent castle. At this point Destiny turned to the poor man and asked, "Why have you traveled so far to see me?"

"I labor long and hard and yet suffer only bad luck," the poor man explained. "So I have come to ask you why."

Destiny nodded. "You have seen the gifts I give to mortals each night. Those born when

I cast out gold and jewels are rich all their days. But those who receive only pebbles and pennies suffer poverty and want. You were born on a day of pebbles and pennies, your brother on a day of gold and jewels.”

“Is there nothing you can do for me, then?” the older brother pleaded.

Destiny thought a moment. “Your brother has a daughter named Miliza who was born, like her father, on a day of gold and jewels. Marry her, and she will be your good luck. But remember that everything you own will be hers.”

The poor man thanked Destiny, hurried home, went to his brother’s house, and asked to marry Miliza. The younger brother agreed, and the wedding was celebrated. Miliza went to live with the older brother, and his fortune quickly changed. He soon found himself a rich man.

One day, a stranger passed by as the older brother worked in the fields. The stranger stopped to admire the bountiful harvest, and he asked the older brother, “Is this wheat yours?”

“Yes,” the older brother answered proudly. The moment he uttered the words, a fire started in the fields and spread throughout the farm, threatening to destroy everything. The older brother ran after the stranger, crying out, “Excuse me, sir, I meant to say that the wheat belongs to my wife, Miliza. Everything I have is hers!” Instantly, the fire vanished, and everything was restored. So from then on, whenever anyone asked, the older brother always said, “Everything I have is from my wife!” And so he and his wife prospered for the rest of their days.<sup>2</sup>

#### IV

In today’s world, the notion of fate or predestination may seem a bit quaint or outdated. The temptation to merely dismiss the tale as a product of a superstitious past is strong. As enlightened people we insist that personal effort and talent count; that individuals are free to determine their own destinies. In the above tale, however, this modern myth is soundly rejected. In spite of all his hard work, good intentions, discipline, and initiative, the elder brother falls into poverty. His younger brother, on the other hand, loafs through life and is richly rewarded. What does this mean?

Destiny remarks that the younger brother was born on a day of good fortune, and the elder on a day of poor fortune. In other words, we might say that the younger brother had better luck than his older brother or perhaps he inherited better genes? Whichever the case, chance, a contemporary version of fate, is involved. Even if most people today reject the idea of destiny, they still accept the possibility of chance and luck. By midlife, most people realize that success is often a matter of being in the right place at the right time,

rather than a reward for hard work. Failure may be perceived as just plain bad luck. These two forces, fate and luck, are beyond an individual's control.

The poor man in the story accepts fate by learning more about how it works. Destiny explains to him that individuals born on the nights he throws out gold and jewels are blessed with great fortune, while those born on the nights of pebbles and pennies are dogged by bad luck. With this explanation the older brother begins to see his small place in the greater scheme of things. He realizes that his misfortune is not specific to him and there are many others who share his plight.

In the Japanese tale, "The Stonecutter," (see Yoneda, *What the Heart Knows, The Joys of Storytelling*, 2001) we see a similar situation. The stonecutter begins with an attitude of envy and a condition of deprivation, just like the older brother in "Destiny." Each time his wish for a better situation is granted, he remains dissatisfied. Eventually he asks to be returned to his initial condition, thus affirming the appropriateness of his original situation and all its limitations. He now has a wider perspective of how he fits into the larger drama of life. Middle tales suggest that it is this wider understanding that resolves the issue of fate and luck. The new insight gained is called wisdom.

In the middle years most people seem to develop a reflective, philosophical attitude. The maturity that comes with age fosters the ability to see the bigger picture, which frequently involves shifting away from logical, linear reasoning and towards intuition. This idea helps to explain one rather puzzling detail in the story. A helpful hermit tells the poor man where to find Destiny and advises him not to speak until Destiny talks to him first. He is also counseled to do everything that Destiny does. This advice is symbolic. By remaining silent, the poor man suspends normal rationality that is based on verbal reasoning and dialog with other people. He then can see the nature of Destiny. Although we do not find it clearly stated, the story implies that if the poor man talked or asked questions out of turn, he would have interrupted Destiny's work and missed the chance to see the full cycle of fate. He needs the experience of waiting and watching to fully understand the bigger picture.

When the poor man comes to understand fate, he asks Destiny how to escape his bad fortune. Destiny's suggestion is that he marry his brother's daughter. Destiny does not change the man's bad fortune; he merely tells him how to compensate for it. In their middle years men and women learn to accommodate fate when they give up their youthful (wasted) efforts to deny it or try to change it.

The poor man escapes his predicament by marrying Miliza. Here we see another of the characteristics of middle tales, role reversal; the man is rescued by the woman. As soon as he claims that the wheat field is his own, he almost loses it. Only by acknowledging that

his good fortune comes from his wife can he keep it, signifying his psychological obligation to honor the feminine.

Accepting the power of fate or luck seems a rather tragic vision of the world. Tragedy does not mean an unhappy ending, however, but rather an insight into the uncontrollable forces that shape our lives. This tragic view contrasts sharply with the heroic spirit of youth, where everything seems possible if we only try hard enough. It may be argued that compared with the youthful spirit, the tragic perspective of midlife seems depressive or dismal. But an acceptance of fate or luck in the middle years can, on the contrary, be quite liberating. It helps us resolve regrets over the past. We can learn to forgive ourselves for misfortunes and mistakes.

Chinen believes that ideally we also learn to forgive other people, particularly our parents. Most youths feel frustrated by their parents at some time, assuming that the parents could do better but refuse to. Young men and women feel that these lapses are willful, rather than the result of inability or limitation, because youth characteristically thinks in terms of blame and guilt. When men and women become parents themselves, they discover their own limitations. They realize that their parents did not refuse love or support; they simply could not give more. The issue is not failure and guilt, but limitation and tragedy. The anger of youth thus yields later in life to mourning, grief, and forgiveness. Humility and compassion flow from tragic insight.

Erik Erikson called this self-acceptance *ego-integrity*. It is an affirmation that one's life is "something that had to be and that by necessity permitted no substitutions."<sup>3</sup> We accept our decisions over the years, right and wrong, and learn to acknowledge the forces that shaped our lives, from childhood experiences to cultural influences and chance events. Ego-integrity is an affirmation of one's fate.

Coming into the light of awareness of who we are and what our lives may mean is a sign of midlife maturity. It is at midlife that we can begin to realize that we are not the sole masters of our lives but that there are other forces at work. We can learn to forgive ourselves for the choices we have made and in turn be more tolerant of the choices of others.

I recently came across a poem by Jayne Relaford Brown, entitled "Finding Her Here," and a prayer called the "17<sup>th</sup> Century Nun's Prayer," author unknown. Both are a fitting end to our discussion here and I leave you to ponder them.

"Finding Her Here"

I am becoming the woman I've wanted  
gray at the temples,  
soft body, delighted,

cracked up by life  
with a laugh that's known bitter  
but, past it, got better,  
knows she's a survivor  
that whatever comes,  
she can outlast it.

I am becoming a deep weathered basket.

I am becoming the woman I've longed for,  
the motherly lover  
with arms strong and tender,  
the growing up daughter  
who blushes surprises.

I am becoming full moons and sunrises.

I find her becoming,  
this woman I've wanted,  
who knows she'll encompass,  
who knows she's sufficient,  
knows where she's going  
and travels with passion.  
Who remembers she's precious,  
but knows she's not scarce  
who knows she is plenty,  
plenty to share.

#### 17<sup>th</sup> Century Nun's Prayer

Lord, thou knowest better than I know myself that I am growing older and will someday be old. Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everyone's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody, helpful but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom, it seems a pity not to use it all, but thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end. Keep my mind free from the recital of endless details; give me wings to get to the point. Seal my lips on my aches and pains. They are increasing and the love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. I dare not ask for grace enough to enjoy the

tales of others' pains, but help me to endure them with patience. I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growing humility and a lesser cocksureness when my memory serves to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken. Keep me reasonably sweet - I do not want to be a saint; some of them are so hard to live with - but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil. Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people - and give me, O Lord, the grace to tell them so.

Amen

#### Notes

1. Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), xiii.
2. Allan B. Chinen, *Once Upon a Midlife. Classic Stories and Mythic Tales to Illuminate the Middle Years*. (New York, New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1992), 108-111.
3. Erik Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*. (New York: Norton, 1983), 268.

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